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SUBJECT: SLEIMAN SEEKS TO PROVIDE EXIT TO A CORNERED HARIRI

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons  
1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) SUMMARY: President Sleiman's confidants report that he is taking controversial positions in the press in an attempt to open an escape hatch for Prime Minister-designate Saad Hariri in the stalled cabinet negotiations. Abi Assi defended the president against recent press attacks and floated the idea of a national conference. Meanwhile, Lebanese Forces leader Samir Geagea praised Sleiman for attempting to give Hariri political cover, especially since Geagea assessed that Hariri does not yet have a clear strategy. Hariri's behavior indicates that he, like other Lebanese leaders, is waiting for clarity on shifting regional dynamics before progressing in his cabinet negotiations. End summary.

PRESIDENT SLEIMAN TRIES TO HELP  
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12. (C) President Sleiman's extensive interview with the Al-Hayat newspaper on September 28 was marked by a sharp rhetorical turn towards the opposition's position. While Sleiman has consistently insisted on opposition approval for any cabinet formula, in talking to Al-Hayat he denied that Iran and Syria are playing a negative role in Lebanon, said he was not opposed to appointing failed parliamentary candidates as ministers, and assessed that the complications to cabinet formation are internal, not external. The statements reflected Sleiman's attempt to redirect Lebanese energies on cabinet formation internally, reported Minister of State without portfolio and Sleiman ally Nassib Lahoud to the Ambassador on September 30. Though Lahoud said he would have formulated the comments differently, he decried the criticism directed at the president by the Hariri-aligned press. Sleiman is "convinced there is nothing but a national unity solution; there is no technocratic, no heavies (party leaders) solution," insisted Lahoud.

13. (C) Presidential advisor Naji Abi Assi floated to the Ambassador on September 29 the idea of a "national conference" to break the logjam and arrive at the national unity government. Abi Assi said this conference, which would resemble the National Dialogue round table, would be called by Sleiman only if Hariri fails to form a government. This conference, Abi Assi stressed, would not be an attempt to reopen the Taif Accord but rather an attempt to address what Sleiman thinks is a "political and not regime" crisis. By hosting the conference, the president could showcase his leadership and provide for an internal political solution, said Abi Assi, who echoed Lahoud's comments that Sleiman felt personally attacked by recent press criticism of himself and his family.

¶4. (C) "Saad doesn't have a strategy. We need to push him to have one," Geagea told the Ambassador on September 30. A pessimistic Geagea described Hariri as "ill-advised, very ill-advised," and reported that he had told Hariri that he became weaker in his role as PM-designate with each passing day, not stronger, as Hariri has asserted both publicly and privately. More importantly, Geagea surmised, Saudi Arabia is moving to delink its relationship with Lebanon from its relationship with Syria. Hariri, surrounded by an "inexperienced" and insular team, does not know how to extract himself from the "corner" that he put himself into when he confronted Free Patriotic Movement head Michel Aoun over allowing his son-in-law Gebran Bassil to return to the cabinet, complained Geagea. Geagea asserted that he never personally opposed appointing those who lost in the June parliamentary elections (such as Bassil) to the cabinet. President Sleiman, Geagea assessed, was trying to help Hariri escape from the deadlock by giving him political cover for Bassil's return to the cabinet in recent remarks to the press.

¶5. (C) Geagea, like many of our interlocutors, could see no immediate way forward from the current deadlock. "We don't know what will happen because the players themselves don't know," he exclaimed. "The cabinet could have been done (earlier) separate from regional events, but now...." he added. When queried by the Ambassador on how the USG could best support Lebanon during the government formation process, Geagea adamantly declared that the USG "can't show (more) support before we do our homework...Even the Saudis are fed up." Geagea judged that Iran and Syria could force a solution to cabinet formation if they so desired. Trying to take the temperature of regional dynamics, Geagea closely questioned the Ambassador on USG relations with Syria and U.S. strategy towards Iran in the upcoming P5 1 talks.

¶6. (C) COMMENT: Lebanon's leaders are currently focused on rumors that Saudi King Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz will visit Damascus next week to return al-Asad's visit. Many see Hariri's expansion of his cabinet formation consultations this week to include civil society representatives as supporting the theory that he is "buying time" in developing a strategy in order to see how regional developments play out. Against this backdrop, Saudi Prince Abdul Aziz bin Fahd staged a visit to Beirut on September 30, calling on both Sleiman and Hariri. The Ambassador will meet with Hariri on October 2 to seek additional insight into his planned next steps.

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